

VZCZCXRO9377

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RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHVL #0668 2261030  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 131030Z AUG 08  
FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2655  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS VILNIUS 000668

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS  
AMEMBASSY MINSK SENDS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: BELARUS: SPAT WITH RUSSIA OVER GEORGIA

REF: VILNIUS 663

11. (SBU) The neutrality of the Belarusian regime with regard to the conflict in Georgia (reftel) has now become the topic of a public bilateral dispute between Minsk and Moscow. Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Surikov, in remarks to the media August 12, decried the GOB's "timid silence" and complained that the Belarusian position was "completely incomprehensible. Citing mutual responsibilities with the Russia-Belarus "Union State", Surikov complained that Russia supports Belarus internationally -- opposing, for example, U.S. economic sanctions on Belarusian leaders -- and has a right to expect support in return.

12. (SBU) A response to Surikov's remarks has been provided by Aleksandr Zimovskiy, Belarusian National State Television and Radio Company Chairman, who spoke to independent press agency Belapan August 12. Zimovskiy, after first deferring to the separate upcoming meetings of the countries' presidents and prime ministers, accusing Putin of snubbing Lukashenko while at the Olympics in Beijing: "Putin [formally Prime Minister of the Union State] was discussing the Caucasian issue not with his formal chief [Lukashenko, Head of the Union State] and legal ally but with others. It follows from this, that Belarus considers Russia to be its ally historically and permanently, but Russia considers Belarus its ally at the moment when it is politically and economically expedient. At the beginning, the Russians gave us to understand: 'We'll be fine without you.' That's understandable. And then they get upset: 'Why have you abandoned us?' This is silly."

Comment  
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13. (SBU) Minsk and Moscow get into minor tussles from time to time, and from our perspective this current spat does not in itself presage any major change in the bilateral relationship (or better prospects for reforms in Belarus). The cancellation or postponement of the upcoming encounters between Presidents Lukashenko and Medvedev or Prime Ministers Sidorskiy and Putin, were that to happen, would indicate a deeper rift.

MOORE  
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